

PRESS RELEASE

Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

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Conyers Calls for Equal Treatment of Haitian Asylum Seekers

Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee issued the following statement regarding the arrival of Haitian asylum seekers in Miami yesterday:

“One of the hallmarks of our great nation is that we have given people from around the world the opportunity to seek refuge from persecution in our democracy. That opportunity must be fairly extended to the Haitians who risked their lives to arrive here yesterday.

It is always tragic to see desperate people jumping from boats to reach our shores. It is especially tragic when the people are Haitian, because many of them come here seeking freedom from persecution and are met by our harsh policies designed to exclude them. The images of people running ashore reminds us once again of the way U.S. policy discriminates against Haitians specifically. Were these individuals Cuban nationals instead of Haitians, each of those who made it to our shores would have been paroled into the community and could have received a Green Card after a year, allowing them to live here freely and eventually obtain citizenship.

Just as we have offered protection to desperate refugees from other nations who have come to our shores, we should ensure that Haitians have the opportunity to fairly state their claims for asylum.

I call upon the attorney general to ensure that each of these individuals is treated in a fair and humane manner, and in the same manner that we treat other refugees who arrive at our borders illegally. Since last December, the INS has refused to release Haitians into the community while they pursue their asylum claims. This policy is inhumane and it flatly discriminates against Haitians under the guise of paternalistic protection.

I again call on the Attorney General to end this policy immediately and to ensure that these and all other Haitian detainees have access to translators and counsel, are provided with adequate time to prepare their cases, and that children are given access to education, recreation and services while in INS custody.

Haitians fleeing political persecution have virtually no legal way to come to the United States. They are not allowed to apply for refugee status at our Embassy in Port-au-Prince. Those who are poor cannot easily get tourist or other visas to come here and seek asylum as other people around the world do. I do not know the individual circumstances that caused these Haitians to risk their lives on the high seas, but now that they have arrived, we must ensure that they are given the same due process to identify their reasons for coming and pursue any claims of asylum they may raise.”

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